

Surviving Sexual Assault: How Self-Compassion Impacts Emotions, Identity, and Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION



Guiding Question

Will people who are more self-compassionate or those who are induced to respond self-compassionately cope better with a painful life event (i.e., sexual assault) than less self-compassionate or control participants?

Theoretical Foundations

- Survivors of sexual assault experience negative emotions, psychological distress, and self-blame, as well as, feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment following the assault (Dunmore, Clark, & Ehlers, 2001; Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Ullman et al., 2007 & Lewis, 2002).
- Self-compassion promotes adaptive cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes in young adults (Neff, 2003a).
- Women tend to have lower self-compassion than men (Yarnell et al., 2015).
- Self-compassionate women have better body satisfaction, higher motivation, and less anxiety regarding body image (Albertson, Neff, & Shuckelford, 2014; Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2016).
- Following a self-compassion induction, women experienced less physiological responses to social stress (Arch et al., 2014).
- Previous self-compassion manipulations have shown that self-compassion is a mindset that can be taught. Several short-term self-compassion inductions have been published (Bresnes & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007) showing that such inductions lead to positive emotional and behavioral outcomes.

HYPOTHESES

- Participants who are naturally self-compassionate or who experience a self-compassion induction will experience less negative emotion and negative identity and more empowerment than participants in a control condition.

METHOD

Study 1: 141 female undergraduate participants

- 72% Caucasian
- Age $M = 22.06$, $SD = 4.77$

Study 2: 71 women staying at a domestic violence shelter

- 41% Caucasian
- Age $M = 33.83$, $SD = 10.79$

Study 1 Procedure

- Received a self-compassion coupled with a verbal learning prompt OR a verbal prompt only
- Answered several comprehension questions
- Read an imagined sexual assault scenario
- Responded to the scenario in a self-compassionate way or by free-writing
- Reported how they anticipated they would feel following the scenario (i.e. emotions, perceived identity)
- Received a private individual debriefing upon the completion of the survey by the research assistant who explained the purpose and hypotheses of the study. This educational debriefing also clarified important information regarding sexual assault.
- Received a resource card to take or share with a friend

Scenario: Your best friend Melissa and her boyfriend are throwing a party at his house... You really hit it off with one guy; he was really cute and very nice.... At the end of the night, he offered to drive you home..... He started trying to kiss you and attempted to take off your clothes. You kept saying no and tried to fight him off, but the more you said no, the angrier he would get. He overpowered you, pulled your dress up, ripped your underwear, and raped you. You begged him to take you home. Once he was done, he acted as though he had done nothing wrong and dropped you off at home.

Study 2 Procedure

- Women who entered the shelter were given the chance to complete a pre-test form at their first victim advocate meeting.
- Pre-test included items assessing negative emotion, state self-compassion, empowerment, and perceptions of safety.
- While in shelter, women could attend support groups including the self-compassion support group
- Self-compassion support group occurred 1 time each week and focused on topics such as self-compassion's benefits and controlling one's emotions.
- When women left shelter they completed the post-test form during their exit interview.

RESULTS

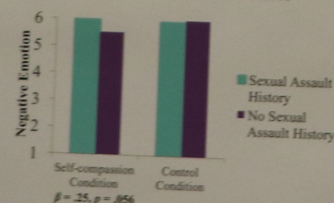
Study 1: Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Predictors: Condition, Centered Trait Self-compassion, Sexual Assault History, and Interactions

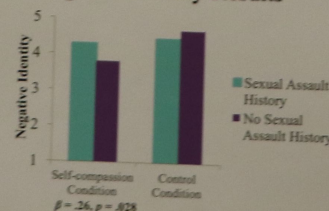
Manipulation Check - State Self-compassion (1 to 7 scale)

Self-compassion condition: $M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.23$; Control Condition: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.28$; $\beta = .16$, $p = .022$

Negative Emotion Results



Negative Identity Results



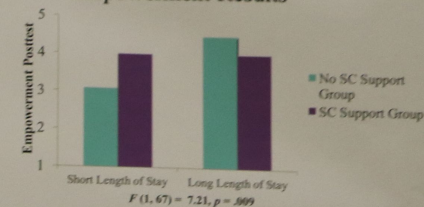
Study 2: Only 31 participants completed both pre and post test measures.

Data showing support group attendance and post-test scores was obtained for 71 participants. Length of stay was included as a potential moderator as women who were in shelter a long time experienced benefits regardless of support group attendance.

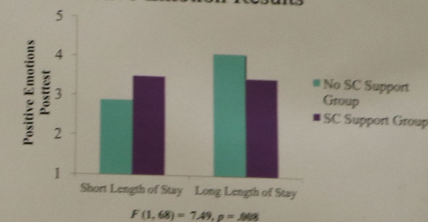
Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Predictors: Support Group Attendance, Length of Stay, and the Interaction

Empowerment Results



Positive Emotion Results



DISCUSSION

- In Study 1, the self-compassion manipulation led to less negative emotions and less negative identity for participants who had never experienced sexual assault.
- Therefore, a short self-compassion induction was not as effective for women who had a previous history of sexual assault.
- In Study 2, mixed results showed attending a self-compassion support group led to stronger empowerment and more positive emotions, but only for women who stayed in shelter a short amount of time.

Limitations

- Study 1 used a short self-compassion manipulation and an imagined scenario.
- Study 2 used a quasi-experimental design as women were free to choose whether to attend group.
- Study 2 had a high attrition rate as many women left shelter without taking the posttest questionnaire.

Future Directions

- Is it possible for a short-term self-compassion induction to reduce negative outcomes for sexual assault survivors?
- Future researchers should strive to look at the effectiveness of a self-compassion support group in a controlled experimental setting.

References available upon request

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INTRODUCTION



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Participants who are naturally self-compassionate or who experience a self-compassion induction will experience less negative emotion and negative identity and more improvement than participants in a control condition.

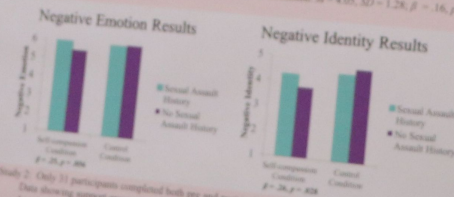
- Study 1: 141 female undergraduate participants
- 10% Caucasian
- Age M = 22.86, SD = 4.77
- Study 2: 71 women staying at a domestic violence shelter
- 40% Caucasian
- Age M = 33.83, SD = 4.97

- * Received a self-completion prompt with a verbal learning prompt OR a verbal prompt only
- * Answered several comprehension questions
- * Read an imagined second sexual scenario
- * Responded to the scenario as a self-companionate way or by free-writing
- * Reported how they anticipated they would follow through the scenario (i.e. emotions, perceived identity)
- * Reported a private individual debriefing upon the completion of the survey by the research assistant who reported the purpose and hypothesis of the study. This educational debriefing also clarified important information regarding sexual assault.
- * Received a resource card to take or share with a friend

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- Pre-test included items assessing negative emotion, state self-compassion, empowerment, and perceptions of safety.
- While in shelter, women could attend support groups including the self-compassion support group.
- Self-compassion support group occurred 1 time each week and focused on topics such as self-compassion's benefits and controlling one's emotions.
- When women left shelter they completed the post-test form during their exit interview.

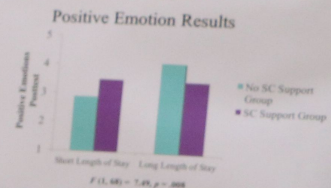
Study 1: Hierarchical Regression Analyses
Predictors: Condition, Central Trait Self-compassion, Sexual Assault History, and Interactions
Manipulation Check - State Self-compassion (1 to 7 scale)
Self-compassion condition: $M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.23$; Control Condition: $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.23$



Study 2: Only 71 participants completed both pre and post test measures.
Data showing support group attendance and post-test scores was obtained for 71 participants.
Length of stay was included as a potential moderator as women who were in shelter a long time experienced benefits regardless of support group attendance.
Hierarchical Regression Analysis
Predictors: Support Group Attendance, Length of Stay, and the Interaction

Length of Stay	No SC Support Group	SC Support Group
Short Length of Stay	~3.5	~4.0
Long Length of Stay	~4.5	~4.0

$F(1, 67) = 7.21, p = .009$



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